

**Subject:** [External] Strengthening Ties between the US and West Africa

Dear Senator Sanders, Senator Welch, Congresswoman Balint, and Major General Knight,

I have just returned to Vermont from Thies, Senegal where I was working on the 'Sister City' relationship we are establishing between Thies and Burlington. The Mayor of Thies East and his team alongside Mayor Weinberger had a Zoom meeting while I was in Thies to establish the next steps of the Sister City partnership. Mayor Weinberger appreciated the solid military partnership between the Vermont National Guard and the Republic of Senegal Military as the foundation for the sister city program. We are making progress, and soon I will be introducing a resolution that will officially ratify the Sister City program between the City of Burlington and the Municipality of Thies East, Senegal.

I am contacting our Vermont Congressional Delegation today with my growing concerns regarding the negative rhetoric being advanced on social media in West African countries about the West. It has become clear that the perception of the West within Africa is changing, especially regarding the relationship between Africa and France.

I am sure that you understand the historical and more recent complexity of the geopolitics in West Africa. There have been several coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and most recently in Niger and Gabon, resulting in the dissolution of ties with France and new ties being formed with countries such as Russia and China. The presence of Russia and China is being seen and felt by West African leaders and communities. For example, infrastructure is being built by the Chinese. There is a new wave of thinking by African leaders and in some cases by the public that these new relationships will be more beneficial.

While the Vermont National Guard has a healthy and strong military relationship with the Republic of Senegal since 2015, more visible partnerships around culture, economic development and environmental infrastructure are needed between the US and West African countries.

As a naturalized US citizen from West Africa, I have chosen to make Burlington, VT my home to raise my children and support my community, including building strong cross-cultural communication. With this as my background and my recent trip to Senegal, I am compelled to express my growing concerns and seek to be part of a solution to solidify strong and positive ties between the USA and West Africa despite the new presence of Russia and China in the region. What are the opportunities beyond military partnership that could be seen, felt and help local West African communities to further develop (i.e.

education, environment, economic opportunity, cultural exchange, etc.)? The Sister City program is one small example of the actions we can take.

I would like to understand what is being done by the federal government on this front. I have ideas and would like to help, and I know many other African immigrants who have settled in the US would like to help as well. It would be great to discuss this further and flesh out some ideas together.

Thank you for your consideration,

Ali